

Doctor wants to remove head from human body, put it on another

It sounds like the plot for a science fiction movie.

Someone has a horrific accident and winds up in the hospital, brain dead and on life support. Doctors approach the family about organ donation, but instead of saving as many as eight lives, the family is asked to donate the whole body to save just one individual. Perhaps a quadriplegic with a mind that outmatches their malfunctioning body.

As crazy as this sounds, to put an entire head on a new body, a human body, Italian physician Dr. Sergio Canavero says we are approaching HEAVEN (an acronym for head anastomosis venture; anastomosis is surgically connecting two parts). The pieces are coming together but there are still many hurdles to jump.

Canavero points to Dr. Robert White, who transplanted the head of one monkey to the body of another at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine in 1970. The monkey died after eight days, because the body rejected the new head. Before it the monkey died, it could not move because the spinal cord of the head and body were not connected. The monkey also was unable to breathe on its own. The paper in which Canavero outlined his procedure references a different 1971 experiment White conducted with six monkey heads, none of which survived more than 24 hours. But Canavero says advances in science and medicine since then eliminate the problems White faced.

Dr. Hunt Batjer, chairman of neurological surgery at UT Southwestern and president-elect of the American Association for Neurological Surgeons, says White's research is not validation for a human head transplant. "[It's] a 45-year-old reference in a primate and there is no evidence that the spinal cord was anastomosed functionally," he says. Batjer further explains that it's a great leap to go from brain survival of the surgery to restoring body function, which White did not look at.

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